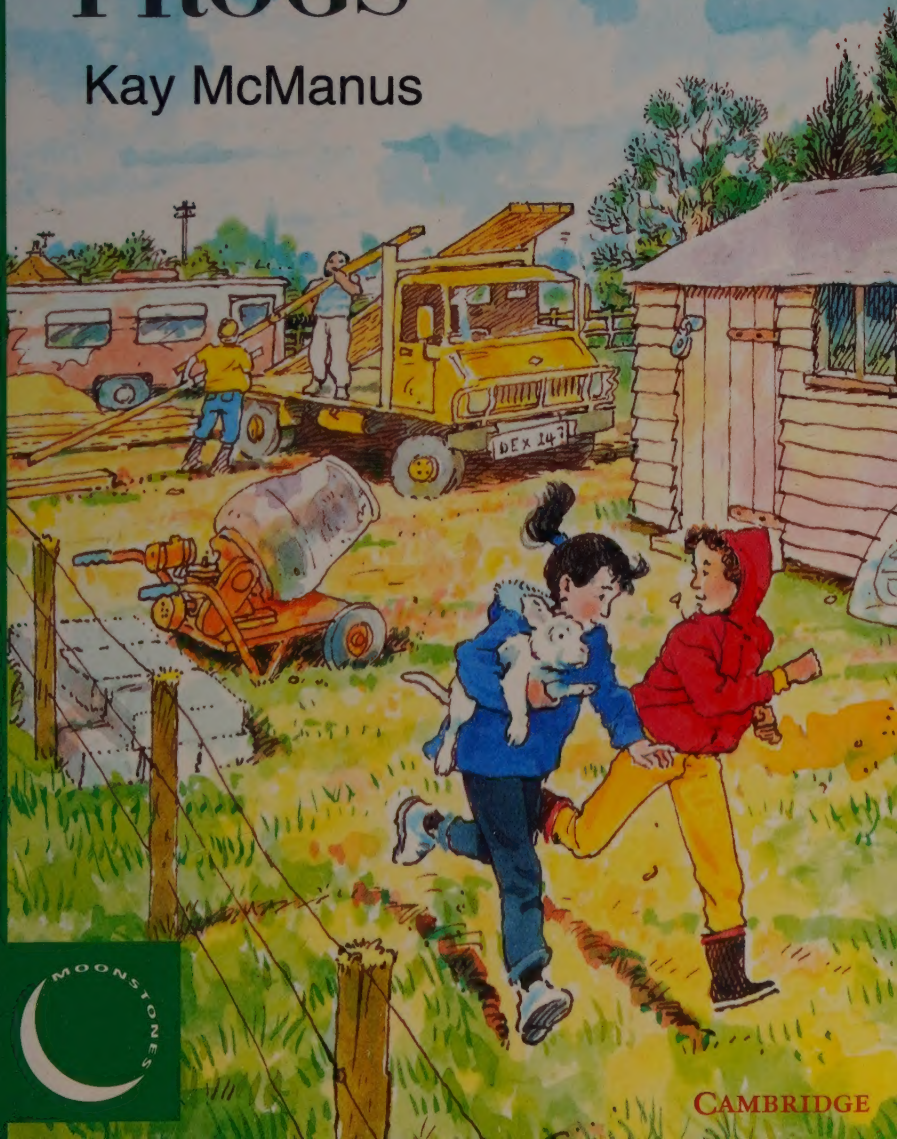


# THE FARNBURY FROGS

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CAMBRIDGE



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GANNOW SCHOOL

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## Chapter 1

When she first saw Number 2 Pinfold Lane, Julie thought there must have been some kind of mistake. The cottage was even smaller than she'd imagined.

Even Mum looked disappointed.

"Still, it's no use grumbling," she said. "We'll just have to count our blessings."

Julie stared at her. "What blessings?"

"Well, your Uncle Joe offering Dad a job on his farm and letting us rent the cottage until we get sorted out."

"We should have stayed put in London," said Julie, watching the two removal men struggling to get a chest of drawers through the front door.

"Don't just stand there," said Mum, "you're in the way."

Julie sighed. "Why can't things always stay the same?"

Her mother seemed to be getting crosser by the minute.

"Why can't they, Mum?"

"Because they can't, that's why. Now, go and find your dad. He went up to Uncle Joe's to tell him we've arrived – goodness knows where he is now!"

She suddenly took hold of Julie's arm and led her out into the lane. "Your Uncle Joe's farm is across those fields over there, only you'd better keep to the road because it's been raining. Stay on the lane as far as the Green and then turn right. Don't keep straight on or you'll end up at the vicarage and that's a dead end – unless you want the footpath that goes to High Cross."

Julie was surprised that her mother seemed to know Farnbury so well.

"Don't you remember?" said Mum. "I came here for a

holiday once when I was a little girl. That was when your gran was working at the big house. We were only here for one summer but I've never forgotten it. I thought it was smashing – and you will, too, as soon as as you make a few friends."

"Friends?" said Julie. "In a place like this?"

Why couldn't they have stayed in Ealing, in London, in the house where she'd been born? This move would mean they'd have to spend Christmas here. How could she possibly enjoy Christmas in a tiny dark cottage when all her friends were still in London enjoying themselves?

Julie glared at her mother.

"I shan't ever like Farnbury," she said. "Not ever!"

As she set off up the lane she could see a few lights in cottage windows and there was smoke curling up from some of the chimneys. Very soon she came to a small triangle of rough grass where there was a war memorial and bus stop. Remembering her mother's instructions, she took the right fork over a small bridge. Surely Northfield Farm couldn't be very far now? She began to run, suddenly disliking the dark and silence, but then she stopped. A small wavering light ahead of her was swerving to and fro across the width of the lane. It was moving towards her quickly, zigzagging sharply from side to side. Horrified, she turned back, and as she did so, heard someone call her name.

"Julie! Julie – don't be silly! It's me!" She stood quite still, waiting until the cyclist had wobbled to an unsteady halt.

"What on earth are you doing, Dad?" said Julie. "And whose bike have you got?"

"Your Uncle Joe's. You know, I've not been on one for years. Funny how you never forget."

"Well it looks as if you've forgotten," said Julie crossly. "And Mum's furious. She's been waiting for you for ages."

"Reckon we could risk the cross-bar like we used to?" he said.

Before she had time to protest, he had her balanced uncomfortably on the bike in front of him and had set off again, wobbling unsteadily from side to side of the lane.

"Oh, Dad – be careful!"

As they reached the Green, he gave a sudden loud shout and began to circle the bike in ever widening swoops.

"Wheeeee ... how's this then?"

"Dad – stop it!"

But as she cried out, the front wheel of the bike suddenly hit a stone and they landed in a tangled heap on the wet grass.

"Sorry, love," he said, "I must be more out of practice than I thought. We'd better walk the rest."

As they reached the cottage, he linked his arm in hers.

"Do you think you're going to like living in Farnbury, then?"

The removal van had gone now, and the lights from the small front room of Number 2 streamed out across the lane. Julie could see her father's eyes shining, catching the light as he grinned. It seemed a shame to disappoint him by telling him the truth at such a moment.

She took a deep breath. "Oh, Dad," she said, "aren't you ever going to grow up?"



## Chapter 2

On their first Sunday in Farnbury, Uncle Joe asked them up to Northfield Farm for dinner.

Julie had been prepared to dislike Uncle Joe. She knew she must have seen him when she was small, but he'd gone off to Australia to farm and, as he never wrote letters, she'd really forgotten all about him. But she could hardly forget him now. After all, it had been his idea that they should move to Farnbury after Dad had lost his job – and here they were now, stuck in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere among a whole lot of strangers.

But when she saw him, she forgot all about being cross. He was tall and thin, with the longest legs she had ever seen.

Later, when they were home again, Julie had asked her mother about those legs.

"They look as if he's trying them out for a friend and isn't too keen on the idea," Julie said.

Her mother smiled. "Poor Joe," she said. "I think he must have got them from your Great Grandpa Parker who was just as tall and just as thin. At school Joe was always falling over. I used to pretend he wasn't my brother. But you'll not notice them once you've got to know your uncle properly."

They were upstairs in Julie's bedroom starting to sort out some clothes for the following morning. Then Julie suddenly stopped looking for a pair of white socks and went across to the window.

"Out with it," said Mum. "What's wrong?"

Julie sighed. "Do I have to go, Mum?"

She already knew the answer but felt that her mother needn't have looked quite so surprised.



"Don't be silly – of course you do. Anyway, I don't understand why you're making such a fuss. It won't be any bigger than your last school."

Julie pressed her face against the window pane.

"At my last school," she said, "I knew everybody."

It might not have been so bad, she thought, if she'd been able to go to the little Farnbury school which she'd noticed on their way to Uncle Joe's. It had a small clock tower with a bell, and a playground where grass was growing between all the cracks. Trust a school to be closed down just before she arrived! Now it meant that she'd have to go on a school bus every day to Broxton which was miles away.

"You are sure they know about me?" she said, for the umpteenth time.

"Of course they know. Dad wrote to them ages ago. And the headteacher sounds very nice. It was his idea that you should start in these last few weeks before Christmas so that you'll settle in better next term."

Julie shivered. "It's going to be awful, Mum."

She wanted her mother to contradict her but Julie could see that she was already thinking of something else. Maybe if she wished hard enough, something dreadful would happen to the school during the night. A fire perhaps? Or an earthquake? But even that wouldn't give Dad his job back – or take them all back to London and to the old house. It seemed that there was nothing now to stop Monday morning arriving.

"Next Sunday," said her mother suddenly, "we'll ask your Uncle Joe for dinner here, shall we?"

Julie didn't reply. By next Sunday she would have lived through one whole week of school. The mere idea seemed an impossibility.

"He won't want to come," said Julie.

She knew it wasn't true but she couldn't help making even that small protest against life in Farnbury. She was going to

be so miserable here. Blinking back the tears, she made herself concentrate on the unpacking of yet another tea-chest.

The next morning Julie woke early and was dressed and ready to be off by seven o'clock. Her father had already finished his breakfast. He was wearing all his oldest clothes and, for once, seemed very subdued.

"Well, wish me luck," he said as he opened the front door.

"You?" said Julie. "Why you?"

"Because it's my first day, too," said Dad, and in an instant, he was gone.

As Julie set off up the lane, she noticed that the door of the cottage opposite Number 2 was wide open, and that a woman was polishing its brass knob.

"If it's the school bus you want," she said, "you've probably missed it. All the buses round here come when they feel like it these days. I think we need another protest about it."

"But I thought I was early," said Julie. "Mum said it came at quarter past eight on the Green."

"You might be lucky," the woman said, and disappeared indoors.

If that's what people are like in Farnbury, Julie thought, the sooner we go back to London the better.

She began to walk faster but was startled when a boy on a bike came from behind and swerved suddenly as he passed her. Without looking back, he turned sharply through the big gates between two lodges at the end of a long drive. As she passed the gates, a small black puppy wriggled through a gap in the wall, and a woman with a baby ran out from one of the lodges.

"That Roly will be the death of me," she said. "He's down here on the doorstep every single morning. I can't keep trailing up to Westbrook to take him home, can I? Not with Sharon and the baby. You'll have to tell her it can't go on. She

should have chosen one of the bigger puppies, like I said."

There was a sudden barking from inside the lodge and then the cry of a child.

"That'll be Sharon again. She doesn't understand that Jet doesn't like her tail being pulled ... look, I'll have to go. Just take Roly back for me, there's a good girl," and before Julie could say a word, the woman had gone inside again and closed the door.

Roly, the puppy, now wild with excitement, was darting to and fro across the road. Julie made a grab to catch it and in the same instant, heard the sound of grating gears. Her school bag dropped from her shoulder as she made a frantic snatch at the puppy. The packet of sandwiches for her lunch fell straight under the wheels of an approaching lorry. As it passed, its driver raised his fist angrily, shaking his head in despair at her foolishness.

"It wasn't my fault," shouted Julie. "You might have killed him!"

It was difficult to keep a hold on the squirming puppy in her arms, but as she stooped to pick up her bag, she heard a loud hooting and saw the school bus beginning to pull away from the Green. Raising her hand to signal, she started to run, still clutching the puppy and the squashed packet of sandwiches. As the bus came nearer, she could see a row of interested faces watching from its windows.

The driver leaned out. "Oversleep, did you?" Gasping for breath, Julie held up the puppy. "It nearly got run over."

He grinned. "Well, you can't take it to school." Glancing at his watch he said, "Come on, love - I haven't got all day."

Julie hesitated, then suddenly felt a hand on her arm, pulling her backwards off the steps of the bus. She turned and saw a girl of about her own age, plump and freckled, reaching out towards the puppy.

"Where do you think you're taking him?" the girl said. "You were trying to steal him."





"No, I wasn't," said Julie.

"Right – well I'm off," said the driver, and began to rev the engine.

The girl, who now had the puppy in her arms, stepped back.

"Oh, bother!" she said. "Now I'll have to take him home and get Dad to give me a lift again. He'll be furious."

"I'm sorry," Julie called as the bus began to move, "but it's my first day and I didn't know who he belonged to."

She began to move along the bus, avoiding the sports bags and the sprawling feet. Why had she tried to apologise when she was the one who had saved the puppy's life? Instead of being thanked she was being blamed. The whole incident was typical of Farnbury. Nothing was going to be fair, not ever again. Still searching for a seat, she saw a boy lean across the aisle, deliberately blocking her way.

"Going to give us a sandwich then, are you?"

He was grinning, staring at the squashed packet in her hand.

"They fell under a lorry, that's all," said Julie.

She pushed her way through to the empty seat as the bus began to gather speed. She thought she heard the sound of laughter, but the boy already seemed to have forgotten her.

For the moment she was safe. Surely here on the bus nothing else would go wrong? Concentrating on looking out of the window, she saw only unfamiliar woods and fields, and the road ahead on which she so fearfully travelled towards her first day at Broxton.

## Chapter 3

Afterwards Julie was able to look back on that first day at the new school and wonder why she had been so afraid. Her mother had been right. The school wasn't much bigger than the old one in Ealing. It merely looked bigger because it had no houses around it – only its own playing fields and, beyond them, a ring road and open fields.

Learning the teachers' names though, and remembering them, was going to be difficult, though nobody seemed to stare or laugh just because she was new and didn't know her way around. Indeed, during the lunch break, she was offered a tour of the whole school by two girls who seemed quite envious about her having lived and grown up in London. It was something Julie hadn't expected.

"Of course, I don't know the whole of London," she told them, "but my dad was once a taxi driver and he had to learn the name of every street."

She could see they were very impressed. She'd never thought of her father as someone interesting before. In fact, she was more used to feeling ashamed of him because he was always clowning about and didn't even try to behave as other fathers did. She couldn't expect such admiration to continue, however, so decided to enjoy the novelty for as long as she possibly could. After all, it was unlikely that the kids at school would ever meet her dad, certainly not while Uncle Joe was able to keep him busily employed up at Northfield Farm.

As the day went on, she began to feel disappointed that she had seen no sign of the girl with the freckles. It would have been good to have the chance to explain about Roly and



that awful lorry, and about the agitated woman at the lodge.

The end of the day came sooner than she had expected. For the first time, she thought about her mother. Maybe she had been lonely, too, during her first day in the tiny cottage, among all the reminders of home and London.

I'll do the washing up tonight, Julie thought, and I'll make her laugh, telling her all the things that have happened.

But as she made her way towards the bus, which was waiting with three others in a lay-by off the main road, she suddenly heard someone calling her name.

A boy, running out of the gates beside her, said, "Is it you they want – those men over there?"

"It can't be," said Julie. "I don't know anybody."

Then she saw one of the men get down from a waiting truck and begin to cross the road towards her. He was wearing a long raincoat buttoned under his chin like a cloak, his face hidden in a knitted balaclava.

"Dad! What are you doing here?"

Bewildered, she looked up towards the driver's cab and saw Uncle Joe's knees, like leaning goal-posts, at each side of the steering wheel.

"But I'm supposed to go on the bus," she said.

Her father gave her a push. "We've had a word with the driver – he's a friend of your Uncle Joe's. He knows you're coming home with us ... go on ... hop up there between us."

Still protesting, Julie climbed up into the truck and wriggled along the front seat. Glancing back towards the school, she was horrified in case anyone had been watching.

"Oh, Dad – why did you have to come and fetch me? And dressed up like that!"

"We had to keep him warm, didn't we?" said Uncle Joe. "He's had a nasty shock, has your dad."

"Shock?" said Julie. "What sort of shock?"

Uncle Joe leaned over and gently lifted one edge of the vast raincoat. Beneath it, Julie saw that her father's right arm

was encased in a large, white plaster cast.

She stared at it in disbelief.

"Dad – what on earth have you done?"

Uncle Joe sighed. "He shot off on my bike in his dinner hour. Wanted to see how your mum was getting on with the unpacking."

"So what happened?" said Julie, hardly wanting to know the answer.

"Coming over the bridge," said Uncle Joe, "he went clean over the handle-bars and into the wall."

Her father looked down at his feet.

"I was trying it with no hands."

"Oh, Dad," said Julie, "and it's only your first day. It's like when you first had the taxi and you forgot to put the brake on."

The truck was beginning to ease its way into the rest of the traffic and Uncle Joe said quickly, "Never mind that now, Julie. It could have been worse and they were very nice at the hospital."

Her father patted her hand. "We've been there all afternoon, so as it was time for you to come home, we thought you might fancy a lift."

Julie sighed. She had hoped that perhaps moving to the country might somehow inspire her father to start behaving sensibly. How on earth would he be able to help Uncle Joe now? But maybe the lift was a good idea, she thought. At least it saved her from a return journey on that bus, where people might remember the squashed sandwiches all over again. And it was rather nice to be perched so high above the crowd coming through the school gates.

"Look, Dad – that's my classroom there ... the second one along on the right. And that glass roof there is the swimming pool."

Her father smiled.

"So your first day wasn't too bad then?"

"Well, it was in a way," said Julie. "I hated being new and

not knowing where to go. And I still wish we'd never moved."

As she spoke, she suddenly caught a glimpse of the freckled girl who'd taken the puppy.

"I know her," she said. "I found her puppy this morning and it nearly got run over. She lives in Farnbury."

"Yes, that's Paula Hammond," said Uncle Joe. "The Hammonds have farmed round here for generations ... they own Westbrook and most of the land, in fact."

She waited for him to say something more, but he seemed to be concentrating on his driving.

"Don't you like her?" Julie said.

"Like her? Of course, I like her," said Uncle Joe.

"Only your voice went sort of funny," said Julie. "And she did seem a bit bad-tempered this morning."

"You'll hear soon enough about the Hammonds, I dare say. And if you want to be friends, you be friends, and don't let other folk put you off."

Sometimes grown-ups were very difficult to understand, Julie thought. Why couldn't Uncle Joe explain the mystery about the Hammonds – if there was a mystery? And why should other people try to stop them becoming friends?

She glanced across at the figure huddled up in the long raincoat and saw that her father looked cheerful and relaxed beneath its folds. He was even whistling tunelessly, as he always did when he was happy. It was almost as if his first day at work had been an enormous success. How could he have been so stupid as to break his arm just when he was most needed? And what would Mum have to say when they got home?

As she looked at him, he suddenly stopped whistling and gave her a wide and cheerful grin.

"Didn't I tell you, Julie?" he said. "Life in Farnbury is going to be terrific."



## Chapter 4

The next morning Paula Hammond was waiting for Julie by the bus stop on the Green.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," she said. "But Dad gets furious when Roly keeps going back to the lodge to see his mother. She's called Jet and she's always having puppies. Roly seems to think he still lives there."

"And was he furious?" said Julie. "Your father – when he had to drive you to school?"

Paula sighed. "Livid. But then he mostly is in the mornings now. He was bad enough when Mum lived with us, but now ... "

"Is she dead" said Julie.

"No – she's living with someone else in Yorkshire. I didn't want to leave Farnbury – or go to another school – but now I think I might just as well have gone with her."

Julie needed time to consider this. Paula seemed so matter of fact, as if she were quite used to mothers who walk out and go and live in Yorkshire. To choose to stay in a place like Farnbury and with a bad-tempered father seemed to be a poor sort of bargain for anyone to make. Perhaps it was all part of the mystery about the Hammonds that Uncle Joe had mentioned. Puzzled, she tried to think of how she could change the subject to something more ordinary.

"I wish we had a puppy," she said.

She'd never thought of the idea in London because there was always so much traffic, and so many other people walking their dogs on the dried up grass of their nearest common. Here, it was all so different. Here, you could choose a different walk for each day of the week. The mere thought

of owning a puppy made even Farnbury seem exciting.

She looked across the Green to where two boys on bikes were leaning against a cottage wall. She recognised one as the cyclist who'd passed her on the previous day.

"Who are they?" she said.

"Oh, them," said Paula. "They leave their bikes there and only come across when they see the bus."

"But why?" said Julie, "when you all know each other."

Paula shrugged. "It's a free country." She was silent for a moment and then she added, "I was born in Farnbury. So was Dad – and my grandad. That's our farm on the hill over there. It's called Westbrook."

"I know," said Julie. "Uncle Joe told me last night."

"What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing – why?"

Paula frowned. "Who was that man who met you from school yesterday ... the one in the long mac?"

"That's my dad. But he doesn't always look like that. He'd fallen off his bike and broken his arm."

Paula was laughing. "I didn't know fathers fell off bikes."

"Mine does," said Julie.

"He sounds great," said Paula.

Julie looked at her in surprise. Surely no one could envy her having such a father? But there was no time to consider the thought as the school bus was already coming over the bridge.

"Come on," said Paula. "We'll sit at the back, away from all the rest."

If Julie had imagined that stepping on to the bus with Paula meant that she would no longer be considered an outsider, she was to learn very quickly that she was wrong. Certainly none of its passengers was staring quite as much as on the day before. Each seemed, in fact, to be making a deliberate effort to look the other way. It was as if she and Paula had suddenly become invisible. Paula, too, seemed to

be behaving oddly. She settled herself by the window on the back seat and put her bag beside her as a kind of barrier. She took out a magazine and continued to read it throughout the whole journey to Broxton.

"Roly's stayed at home today then, has he?" said Julie, to break the silence.

Without looking up, Paula said, "I made sure he did. I locked him in the big barn."

"I wish he was mine," said Julie. "He's lovely."

She could see it was going to be difficult to make friends with anybody in Farnbury. It was as if everyone expected her to understand things without being told – things like why nobody on the bus had spoken to Paula, and why Paula herself, after being so friendly at the bus stop, was now behaving as if they weren't even sitting together. What was it that Mum had said about life in a village? Wasn't it something about people being more friendly and caring than they were in big cities like London? She wondered how Mum could have pretended to believe anything so clearly untrue.

Once they'd arrived at school, Paula seemed to relax again, and the two girls made arrangements to go for a swim during the dinner hour, and to meet by the school gates for the afternoon journey home.

There was something else to cheer Julie up, too. With the help of Uncle Joe, she had managed to extract a promise from her father that he would never meet her out of school again – well, at least not when he was wearing that ridiculous raincoat of Uncle Joe's. Naturally, she was very sorry about the broken arm, but being sorry for him didn't make it any easier to accept that she had the sort of father that no one else seemed to have.

Anyway, with a busy day ahead, there was no time to worry about that – and the less time she had to worry, the less chance there'd be of remembering her old life in London and all her friends so far away.



Feeling slightly more cheerful, she set off to experience her second day as a new girl.

The few weeks leading up to Christmas proved to be some of the busiest of Julie's life. She discovered that Broxton School had a reputation for throwing itself wholeheartedly into celebrating the festive season in every possible way. Julie soon found herself swept up into a round of drama rehearsals, school bazaars and carol concerts. Although they were in different classes, she and Paula often found themselves sharing the same activities. It still seemed strange that Paula appeared to have no friends of her own, but Julie was pleased when teachers began to link their names together and see them as a kind of partnership.

But not everyone in the family was enjoying Farnbury, for Julie soon became aware that her mother was no longer her former cheerful self.

"There's hardly enough room to swing a cat in this place," Mum said, one dark December afternoon. "And what with your father hanging round half the time under my feet, it's enough to try the patience of a saint!"

"I thought he was helping Uncle Joe with the accounts," said Julie.

Her mother laughed. "And what does your father know about accounts? Anyone with sense would have stopped to think before he broke his arm at a time like this. It's not fair on any of us – least of all on your Uncle Joe."

Julie hesitated. "Has Uncle Joe been complaining?"

Scornful, her mother said, "No, of course he hasn't. That's his trouble. He's always been far too easy-going and, from what I hear, your dad's getting away with murder. Apparently all he does in your uncle's office is sit and read."

Julie took out a cloth from a drawer and began to lay the table for tea. "People are funny, aren't they?" she said.

Her mother was beating some eggs in a basin, fiercely

turning the whisk until it almost leapt out of the bowl.

"You can say that again."

"Take Paula, for instance," said Julie quickly. "I feel I've known her for ages and yet sometimes she goes all quiet as if she doesn't want to be friends. And nobody seems to speak to her. I think Uncle Joe knows why but I don't like to ask him."

"No, and don't you go worrying that poor man any more," said Mum, "or he might regret having asked us here and throw us all out into the street." She paused, and suddenly smiled. "Well, into the lane. Oh, I'm sorry, Julie. It's just that I've never found it very easy to accept charity – but I shouldn't take it out on you, should I?"

"What's charity got to do with us?" asked Julie. "Or with Uncle Joe?"

"Nothing," said Mum firmly. "Absolutely nothing – and mind you remember that. Your Uncle Joe insists on saying that he asked us here because he needed your father's help. And if he can bring himself to believe that – then so can you and I. Right?"

"Right," said Julie.

Sometimes, she thought, grown-ups were just as difficult to understand as friends who didn't always want to talk.

On the Saturday before Christmas, Paula called in at Number 2 on her way to the vicarage.

Picking up Roly from the doorstep, she said, "I've promised to collect the Christmas crib from the vicar. One of the wooden donkeys has lost a leg and Bill Meadows, who helps Dad with the sheep, says he'll mend it." She sighed. "I asked Dad but he said he hadn't time. I don't know why I bothered. He never has time when I ask him things."

To cheer her up, Julie said. "But I'm sure he'd have been able to do it. Now, if you'd asked my dad, he wouldn't have had a clue. He once put a shelf up for Mum and it fell down

and broke all her best tea service."

Comforted by the thought that she was not the only one with a difficult father, Julie said, "Did you want something?"

"Yes," said Paula. "I thought we could take Roly for a walk at the same time. We could go up Castle Hill, along the ridge path, past Cooper's Pond and back to the vicarage that way. Oh, and if you need any holly we could get some in Poachers' Wood."

"Poachers' Wood?" said Julie.

"It belongs to Dad so you can have as much as you want."

Julie tried to imagine what it would be like to own a wood of your own. She knew, of course, that every house and garden in London was owned by somebody, but she had never really considered the idea that in the country, too, each field, each length of hedge must also belong to someone.

"We own most of the land round here," said Paula. "But we have tenants in most of the farms – your Uncle Joe, for instance."

Julie stared at her. "You own the land – all of it?"

Paula was blushing. "Well, nearly all. Dad's sold some of it." She suddenly turned away and gave a jerk to Roly's lead. "Well, are you coming – or aren't you?"

"I'm coming," said Julie.

On the open hillside the wind was icily cold and Julie almost wished she'd stayed in the warm cottage to help Mum with the mince pies. But gradually, as her toes and fingers warmed up, she began to enjoy the nip of frost in the air. When at last they moved into the dim light of Poachers' Wood it was like walking into the shelter of a cave. She was quite pleased, though, that she wasn't alone. In the last half hour the sky had darkened, and there was only the sound of creaking branches and their own breathing to break the silence. Even Roly seemed uneasy, and kept sitting down as if he didn't want to go any further.

To make herself think of something else, Julie said, "Those two boys on bikes – the ones we see every morning by the Green – where do they live? And who are they?"

Paula looked surprised. "The dark-haired one's called Tony. He lives in a cottage near the bridge. The other's Rod. He lives at the manor. Well, it's not really the manor house – that fell down years ago. But his father built a big house and bought the two lodges. He owns a factory or something in Broxton."

"They don't seem very friendly," said Julie. "They always cycle past looking the other way."

Paula was reaching up towards some high branches of holly. "Well, don't pretend you don't know why," she said.

There was no going back now. "But I don't," said Julie. "I don't understand anything about people in Farnbury. Why don't they speak to you on the school bus? Has it always been like this?"

"Not always," said Paula. "But why don't you ask your Uncle Joe – then you can stop speaking to me as well. People expect things always to stay the same. But they don't. Land has to be looked after – even a wood like this – and it costs money. You can't blame Dad. But I don't want to talk about it any more."

They finished collecting the holly in silence, and then ran down the hill again towards the village. After a few minutes they skirted a small round pond, overgrown with reeds and ringed by a few leaning willows.

"It's called Cooper's Pond," Paula said. "It used to be a fish pond for the old manor house. It never dries up – not even in a hot summer. You should see the frogs in the spring. They come to the pond every year to spawn."

"Frogs?" said Julie. "I love frogs."

Paula was looking cheerful again now. "The local paper often sends someone to take photographs. Hundreds of frogs



come up from that marshy land over there, and every spring they cross Church Lane in exactly the same place. When we were small, all our gang used to come up here to get frog-spawn."

"Your gang?" said Julie. "Then you must have had friends before."

She knew she had said the wrong thing even before she had finished speaking. Why couldn't she have stopped to think before she spoke?

"Don't bother to come to the vicarage," said Paula coldly. "I'll see you on the bus on Monday."

"No, wait!" said Julie quickly. "Come back for tea. Mum won't mind. Anyway, she'd like to see the Christmas crib and I know she's making some mince pies."

She thought with sudden alarm of her mother's cross face, and of the crowded, tiny living room where none of their London furniture seemed to fit. Worse still, there was always the possibility that her father would be there, too. Perhaps he'd be sleeping by the fire as he often did on Saturday afternoons. If he was there, he'd be wearing those awful old carpet slippers with the holes in the toes. But it was too late now to hesitate.

"In fact, Mum's been wanting you to come for tea for ages," she said, keeping her fingers tightly crossed behind her back.

Luckily, Paula smiled. "Great!" she said. "Come on, Roly – what are we waiting for?"

Surprisingly, Paula's first visit to Number 2 Pinfold Lane worked out far better than Julie could ever have imagined. The warm smell of new baking greeted them as they opened the front door, and they found a cheerful Mrs Barlow on her knees in front of a blazing log fire. Beside her in the hearth lay a plate of hot, buttered crumpets.

She turned, smiling. "It must be Paula," she said. "I've heard so much about you. Julie should have brought you

before – but, of course, we’ve been so busy with moving and sorting things out.”

Hardly believing her good luck, Julie said, “Where’s Dad?”

“Goodness knows,” said her mother. “At the library in Broxton, I should think. Your Uncle Joe needed a few things so your father took the chance of a free lift.” She stabbed a fresh crumpet and held it towards the glowing logs. “He’s a great reader is Julie’s father.”

“I was very sorry to hear about his arm,” said Paula.

Julie was impatient for all this formal politeness to be completed, but already she could see that the visit was going to be a great success. Soon, they were all relaxed over tea and listening to Paula’s accounts of her life in Farnbury. Then, by the time they had finished the crumpets and two mince pies each, Mrs Barlow was describing how Julie had once been taken to the Lord Mayor’s Show by her father. He had absent-mindedly forgotten all about her and gone home on his own.

“Can you believe it?” said Mrs Barlow. “A little girl of four in the middle of all those crowds. Anyway, she had the sense to go to a policeman so they had her safely back home within the hour.”

“Does Mr Barlow often forget things?” said Paula.

When they’d all finished laughing, Mrs Barlow said, “You must come again, Paula. That’s what’s been wrong with this cottage, we’ve not had enough visitors yet. Now, in London we always had open house, people coming and going all the time.”

“That must have been lovely,” said Paula. Then, suddenly, she stood up. “I’d better go,” she said. “Bill Meadows will be waiting for the crib.”

Julie looked at her, surprised. Once more, Paula seemed to be drawing back, speaking in that same cold voice that she always used when she was angry. Julie wanted to persuade

her to stay longer, but her mother was already moving to the door.

"Come again any time you want, Paula. You don't need to ask."

Afterwards, when they were washing up, Julie said, "I wonder why she didn't like hearing about our house in London."

"I expect it made her feel even more lonely than she already is. Anyway, I expect she was pleased you asked her for tea. She can't be having many invitations these days, poor soul."

Julie looked at her mother. "You know something, don't you?"

Mrs Barlow hesitated. "Only since this afternoon. I went round to get some eggs from Mrs Roberts and she told me the whole story about the Hammonds."

"Paula told me her mother had left to go and live in Yorkshire."

"Yes, they'd been unhappy for years apparently, and then all this trouble blew up and she walked out. She's living with her sister or cousin or someone."

"What sort of trouble, Mum?"

"Well, farmers aren't having it quite so easy these days and Mr Hammond had a lot of money problems. Anyway, last year he got planning permission for some new houses and he's sold quite a large chunk of his land. It upset the whole of Farnbury. Nobody wanted the village to change and there's been a big rumpus apparently – protest meetings and petitions and all that. I think he's made a lot of money over the deal and that hasn't helped. Everybody liked Paula's mother, so Mrs Roberts says, so when she walked out as well ... In fact, in the eyes of the village, Mr Hammond is a right old villain."

Julie stared at her mother.

"But that's not fair, Mum. It wasn't Paula's fault, was it? They won't even speak to her on the school bus. I think that's rotten. It's just not fair!"

Mrs Barlow sighed. "Who said life was fair?" she said.



## Chapter 5

Julie was disappointed when there was no sign of Paula at Uncle Joe's Boxing Day party.

She'd been hoping to tell her all about their first Christmas Day in the cottage and about everybody's presents. She knew Paula would have laughed about the mess her father had made when he tried to carve the turkey with his one good hand, especially the bit about the two sausages that shot off the plate and landed in the cat's milk.

The party, though, seemed to be going well. Mrs Atkins, who did all the cooking and cleaning for Uncle Joe, had excelled herself. The big table in the kitchen was laden with cold meats, pasties, pies, scones, shortbread and cream-cakes, almost crowding out the large snow-white Christmas cake in its frill of scarlet and gold.

When at last she could eat no more, Julie went into Uncle Joe's small office where he did all the farm accounts. So this was where her father spent most of his time! Looking round the quiet room, she could hardly blame him. Two of the farm cats were sleeping peacefully on top of a box of papers. A log fire threw darting shadows over the book-lined walls and in the middle stood one of the largest desks Julie had ever seen. Reading in such a room, she thought, must be one of the nicest ways of escaping from what you were supposed to be doing.

Suddenly, she heard a burst of laughter from the kitchen. Her father was beginning to sing one of his special Christmas songs. She certainly wasn't going to go back in there! How could he pretend that this party was just the same as their London ones? Surely he must realise that now they were in

Farnbury and that nothing was ever going to be the same again.

Sighing, she went to the window and looked out over the bare fields. How distant London seemed and how remote all those noisy family parties she'd once taken for granted. Already most of her friends would have forgotten her. She might just as well accept the fact that in future all Christmases were going to be like this one – lonely and boring and somehow disappointing.

"Julie ... "

She turned and saw her uncle standing in the doorway. "I wondered where you'd got to. You've just missed one of your father's songs."

"I know," said Julie, "I could hear him from here."

"He's a rare old caution," said Uncle Joe.

He had sat down on the edge of the desk and was studying one of his legs thoughtfully.

"Nothing wrong, Julie, is there?"

Before she could stop herself, she said, "Why couldn't you have asked Paula to come to the party? It's not her fault about the new houses."

Uncle Joe smiled. "Of course it's not. And it's high time all that was forgotten. But I did want her to come. I invite them every year and they've never missed – at least, not while Mrs Hammond was still around."

Julie stared at him. "So you really did want her to come?"

"Well, of course I did. Boxing Day's always open house at Northfield. But I thought it wiser this time to have a private word with her mother first. She'd come back to deliver Paula's Christmas present and I happened to bump into her. She thought it best to leave it this year – and I agreed. Bill Hammond's temper being what it is, it'll take more than twelve months for him to forget some of the things that were said about him selling off that land. And I didn't want to make it any more difficult for Paula."

"What a lot of fuss over a few new houses," said Julie.

"It's rather more than that, Julie. They're going to widen Church Lane and make the old bridle path into a new road that will go right through to High Cross near the motorway. No, it's going to change Farnbury all right. It'll mean that folk can work in London and still come out here to live. Still, even that doesn't excuse the way some of 'em round here have been behaving."

He looked at Julie thoughtfully. "Maybe you might be able to help."

"Me?" said Julie.

"You could drop a few hints to Tony and Rod for a start, make them see the error of their ways."

"The boys on the bikes?" said Julie.

Uncle Joe uncurled himself to his full height. "No time like the present. Come on."

Julie stared at him in horror. "But I don't know them. They never speak to me. They just cycle round until the school bus comes and then they grab the front seat. And that's that. Every morning it's the same."

"Then, here's your big chance to put an end to such nonsense," said Uncle Joe, taking her arm.

Ignoring her protests, he led her briskly along the flagged passage towards the front stairs. Halfway up, Tony and Rod were sitting beside a large plate of ham sandwiches.

"This is my niece, Julie," said Uncle Joe. "She's new to living in the country so perhaps you can give her a few hints and tell her what it's all about."

Tony, the smaller of the two boys, hid his plate guiltily and made a space beside him on the stairs.

"Sorry," he said. "We were just going to bring these back."

Uncle Joe smiled. "I bet. But I'd hang on to them if I were you. Julie will help you out anyway. I'll see you later."

Julie wished she could have followed him back to the kitchen but she could see that it was no moment for cowardice.





Taking a deep breath, she said, "I've seen you both on your bikes. In fact, I saw you on my first morning, the morning I found Roly. You know Roly, Paula Hammond's dog."

The boys stared at her for a moment and then held out the plate of sandwiches.

"Thanks," said Julie, her heart still thumping. At least she'd had the courage to mention Paula's name.

Tony grinned, "Yes, you had some squashed sandwiches. Fell off a lorry or something."

"Not off it," said Julie, "under it."

She didn't seem to be doing very well, but there was no going back now.

"Why don't you ever speak to her?" she said. "It's not her fault about the houses."

Standing up suddenly, Tony said, "I want some cake. You tell her, Rod."

The other boy waited for a moment until the kitchen door had slammed behind him.

"I haven't been speaking to Paula for ages."

"Why not?"

"It's her fault just as much as mine," said Rod defensively. "You see, my dad thought Mr Hammond should have asked his permission about building the new houses. And I agree with him. Dad's spent a lot of money on repairing the boundary walls and doing up the two lodges since we've been living at the manor."

"So you and Paula got into a row about it?" said Julie.

"Yeah. She stuck up for her dad and I stuck up for mine."

"But what your dad thinks has got nothing to do with Paula, has it? You needn't have taken sides."

"Like Paula, you mean?" said Rod. "She took sides all right – you should have heard her. She said people like us shouldn't be allowed to buy property in villages. She must have forgotten what the manor house looked like before ... it

had no roof and there was a cattle-trough in what was the old kitchen."

"She was only sticking up for her father," said Julie. "And I suppose I'd even stick up for my dad if it came to the crunch."

Rod looked surprised. "Don't you like your father then?"

"Oh, I do sometimes," said Julie, "when he's not being himself."

She was about to explain what she meant when Tony suddenly appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Come on, they're starting charades," he said. "I don't usually like them but your uncle's brilliant. Last year he pretended to be the Eiffel Tower and we all got it straight away. You coming, Julie?"

She hadn't made much progress as a peacemaker, Julie thought, but at least she was now being spoken to and, for the first time, Christmas at Farnbury seemed to be looking up.

"Try and stop me!" she said.

## Chapter 6

It wasn't until the last day of the school holidays that Julie had a chance of seeing Paula again. She was now dreading the meeting more than ever since Mrs Thomas's visit that morning.

Mrs Thomas had rushed across to Number 2 in a fever of excitement.

"They've started!" she said. "I've seen them with my own eyes. They've put some foundations in already – two semis at the back of the vicarage. It's a wicked shame, if you ask me, and it's high time we organised another protest."

"But isn't it too late now?" said Julie. "Uncle Joe says it's all been approved, the new road and everything."

Mrs Thomas had given a loud sniff. "Approved? Not by me, it's not! And if the vicar will give me the nod, I'll have a new roster out in a jiffy – just like last year. We'd stop them laying another brick. That'd show 'em – and those Hammonds who're at the bottom of all this."

At that moment, the telephone rang.

"It's Paula," said Mrs Barlow. "She says would you like to go up to Westbrook for your dinner?"

Deeply shocked, Mrs Thomas said, "Don't tell me you're speaking to the Hammonds? Not after all they've done!"

"Paula's my friend," said Julie, "my best friend, and I shall speak to whoever I want." She hurried out of the room quickly to avoid her mother's disapproving eye.

Paula was waiting for her at the end of the gated road which led up to Westbrook.

"I went to my aunty's in Matlock for Christmas," she said.

"I think we went there because Dad hates Christmas now without Mum, though he pretended it was because of me. My aunty always has a big party, you see."

"So does Uncle Joe," said Julie.

Paula sighed, "I know. But Dad wouldn't have come to that. Not this year anyway."

"I think people are stupid," said Julie. "Oh, I don't mean your father – just people generally."

"They don't understand, that's all."

Julie waited in silence for a moment then Paula turned and said, "He was forced to sell that land. He needed the money. He's not like your father, always laughing and joking about everything."

Surprised, Julie said, "But my dad needs money too. That's why we had to come here when he lost his job. They closed the warehouse, you see."

"I thought you said he drove a taxi."

"Oh, that was years ago," Julie said. "He's had two other jobs since then, but something always seems to go wrong. Dad always makes it sound funny afterwards, but Mum doesn't laugh very much. I don't suppose he'll stick this farming job for very long."

"I meant," said Paula carefully, "that he doesn't seem to mind about not having money. Now, my dad minds – he minds a lot. In fact, nothing else really matters to him."

They walked on in silence, Roly pulling on his lead as he always did, then Paula said, "Dad's had to go up to London for the day, so there's only you and me. There's fish fingers and some beans, and ice-cream for afters."

"Great!" said Julie.

She bent down to pick up Roly. He was growing fast and seemed even more difficult to hold.

"Can we take him for a walk afterwards?"

Paula shook her head. "Sorry, I can't. I'm going to the lodge this afternoon. Mrs Cowling's got to take the baby for



an injection, so she's asked me to play with Sharon while she's gone. Mrs Cowling's about the only one who's agreed with what Dad's done. She says good luck to him, and that she'd just do the same if she was in his shoes. But I suppose that's because she's never had any money and Mr Cowling's always in hospital. Anyway, I've said yes."

She handed over the lead to Julie. "But if you like you can take him on your own. He can't go with me to the lodge because he goes mad if he sees Jet. And I don't like to leave him here on his own because he always howls."

"Great," said Julie. "Come on, Roly – after dinner you and I are going for a walk."

They spent a long time talking over the fish fingers and ice-cream, and were so late in setting off that they had to run nearly all the way to the lodge.

"May I show Roly to Mum first?" asked Julie as they parted.

"Good idea – and then I'll slip away while he's not looking."

Mrs Barlow had settled down by the fire for an afternoon of knitting, but she said she was quite happy to be interrupted by Roly any time.

"I'm taking him for a walk," said Julie, "Do you want to come?"

Her mother glanced at the fire, and then through the tiny window at the grey winter sky.

"No, I think I'll stay put," she said. "And mind you don't go too far – it gets dark so early."

Julie set off with Roly, trying hard to distract his attention as they passed the lodge. There certainly seemed to be a lot of traffic in Church Lane, and as they came nearer the vicarage, she could see several builders' huts and two rows of posts marking the edges of the new road. Some of the hedge at the side of the lane had been dug out to allow the lorries into the

fields beyond. Already it all looked quite different from the Church Lane she had seen when she first arrived in Farnbury.

After a while she decided not to turn back but to continue along the new road towards High Cross. It was quieter now and she felt it would be safe to let Roly off his lead. Delighted, he rushed to and fro, barking and snapping in a wild frenzy of excitement.

As the road began to climb, the new posts gradually disappeared under the frozen drifts of snow left from the previous week's fall, and it soon became difficult to walk. Turning to call to Roly, Julie saw that the road behind her was empty.

"Roly!" she shouted. "Roly – where are you?"

It was beginning to snow, and tiny flakes like jagged splinters filled the air above her head.

"Roly!"

Julie began to run back, calling as she went. As she passed one of the new openings in the hedge, she thought she caught a glimpse of Roly in the clump of trees above Cooper's Pond. Running through the opening, she went on calling, ignoring the sound of a lorry behind her. She turned and saw its driver waving to her from the cab.

"What do you think you're doing?" he shouted. "This is private land. Didn't you see the notice?"

"I've lost Roly," she said. "I let him off the lead and now he's gone. I thought I saw him up there by the trees."

The snowflakes were larger now and it was difficult to see any of the hill beyond the pond.

"He's only a puppy, you see," said Julie, feeling tears beginning to choke her throat.

"Look, I'll tip this last lot," said the driver, "then I'll give you a lift back. You won't be able to find him now anyway. The snow's beginning to settle and it's getting dark."

"But I can't just leave him," said Julie. "He isn't mine. I



was supposed to be looking after him."

"Well, I reckon you should get home sharpish," said the man. "I don't like the look of that sky."

Julie watched as the lorry bumped forward towards the pond and tipped its load of rubble in a large mound beside it. It turned again in a wide circle, and the driver stuck out a hand in greeting as he passed.

What on earth should she do now? It had been difficult enough making friends with Paula in the first place. Things would be even worse now that she'd lost Roly – and it was only the first time she'd been trusted to take him for a walk on her own. She would even have to pass the lodge. Paula might look out and see her with the empty lead. But should she go there straight away to report the awful news?

Then suddenly, Julie had an idea. There was just one more hope. Hadn't Roly always made his way to the lodge whenever he'd had a chance to see Jet? Supposing today he'd gone back to see his mother again.

Within a few minutes, Julie was pounding on the door of the lodge. She heard Jet begin to bark and then the sound of Paula's voice. The door opened and she saw Paula standing there, unsmiling, with a squirming Roly in her arms.

"Oh, thank goodness he's all right," Julie gasped. "I thought I'd lost him."

"Why on earth did you let him off the lead?" Paula's voice was icy. "He could have been run over by one of the lorries."

"Is he all right?"

Paula was starting to close the door. "No thanks to you, he is. Anyway, Mrs Cowling's back now so I'm taking him home when we've had tea."

"I am sorry," Julie said.

There seemed nothing else to say.

That evening Julie went to bed early, needing time to think. Perhaps the village had been right to be angry with the



Hammonds. She could see for herself that, thanks to the new building work, Farnbury was already changing. What a dreadful afternoon it had been. A memory of the lorry tipping rubble beside the pond suddenly flooded back – a pond with its reeded edges strangely bare. The builders must have uprooted the willows! Surely they weren't intending to fill in Cooper's Pond? Whatever would Farnbury have to say about that?

Feeling even more sorry for Paula than for herself, she closed her eyes and settled down to sleep.

## Chapter 7

Paula seemed very quiet during the first day of the new term, but by the second she and Julie had settled back into an easy, even more relaxed relationship than before. It was as if their small clash about Roly had somehow proved that their friendship was now strong enough to withstand all future disagreements and irritations.

"I shouldn't have blown my top like that," said Paula, during her long apology. "But our Christmas was so rotten, and you kept going on about that marvellous party at Northfield and about how nice Rod and Tony had been. It reminded me all over again about them not speaking to me. I couldn't help getting cross with you about Roly!"

Laughing, Julie said, "I'm sure they'll speak to you this term. People don't go on being silly and horrible for ever."

Even as she spoke, she wasn't sure whether she believed this to be true, but it seemed to cheer Paula up. In an odd way, it also seemed to mark the beginning of their new and stronger friendship.

Life at home, however, continued to have its complications.

"Your Uncle Joe's a saint," said Mum, on a particularly cold January morning. "A saint, that's what he is."

It was Saturday. Julie was helping with the washing up and wondering if she'd have a chance of seeing Paula before Mum had time to find another job for her to do.

"What do you mean, Mum?" she said.

Mrs Barlow dried her hands. "Because he never complains about your dad, for a start. The idea was for Dad to help him

on the farm – but what happens? He breaks his arm on the first day and all he does now is sit in that office up at Northfield and read your uncle's books."

"But he answers the phone as well," said Julie. "Uncle Joe says he's very useful."

"That's what I mean – the man's a saint. Take this morning, for instance. He's waiting for your father to go into Broxton to fetch some special paint for the gutters. And where is he? You tell me that, Julie. Where is he?"

"He said something last night about going up Castle Hill."

Her mother stopped folding the tea-towel and said, "Why should he want to go up there?"

"Because of the Romans," said Julie. "You know what he's been like since he found that book about them when we first came. Castle Hill is the site of an old fort – even earlier than the Romans. Dad says they used it as well, because it was near the junction of two of their roads."

"Romans!" said Mrs Barlow. "I ask you!"

Seeing the look on her face, Julie said quickly, "Shall I go and look for him up there?"

Her mother sighed. "You better had, Julie. And whatever he's doing – tell him to stop."

On the way to Castle Hill, Julie kept up a steady jog, and only slowed down when she reached the slope behind Westbrook Farm. She paused for a moment, half hoping to catch a glimpse of Paula, but there was no sign of life and she set off again at a good pace.

After five minutes of climbing, she suddenly saw a figure on the skyline. It was bent almost double, crouching low over the ground.

She had no breath left to call him, so continued the long uphill trudge in silence, but her dad looked up as she reached him.

"Here, Julie, have a look at this."

He pulled back the short grass to reveal a line of rough, square stones.

"Dad – you're supposed to be fetching some paint for Uncle Joe."

Her father looked surprised. "Really? Do you know, I'd quite forgotten. Only you see, I've just had the most fascinating conversation with a jogger. He's mad on history, so, of course, I had to give him the details of that book of your Uncle Joe's ... the one I read soon after we came here."

"I remember," said Julie. "But Mum's furious and Uncle Joe's waiting."

Her father took a deep breath and gazed around him.

"Isn't it just great, Julie – living and working out here in the country?"

"Only you're not working, are you?" said Julie crossly. "That's the whole trouble. Mum says Uncle Joe's a saint to put up with you."

"He's certainly got the right sort of legs for a saint," said Mr Barlow thoughtfully. "Have you ever noticed that one in the east window of the church?"

Julie giggled. It was always hard to be cross with her father for very long. Then she noticed that he was gazing down the hill.

"Isn't that Paula down there?" he said.

"Oh, great," said Julie. "Look, I must go. Now don't forget – Uncle Joe's waiting for you."

"To think," said Mr Barlow, "I can actually touch stones that were laid by Roman hands."

"Oh, Dad!" Julie sighed. "Honestly!"

Roly was yapping with excitement as she caught up with Paula.

"What are you doing up here?" Paula said.

Julie grinned. "We'd lost Dad again. There ought to be a book for fathers on how to behave."

"I know," said Paula. "Mine's in a foul mood this

morning. I've come up here to get out of his way. I thought I'd take Roly across to Cooper's Pond. I haven't been there for ages."

Julie caught her breath. Cooper's Pond? That was something she'd completely forgotten.

"I meant to tell you," she said, "that day when I lost Roly. The builders seem to have dug up all the willows and they were dumping some rubble. It looked as if they were going to fill it in."

"Fill in Cooper's Pond? But they can't!" said Paula. "What about the frogs?"

"The frogs?" Julie stared at her. "I'd never thought about the frogs."

Paula had already set off down the hill.

"Wait for me," Julie shouted, and when at last she caught up with Paula, she gasped, "I'm sorry – I honestly forgot to tell you. What are you going to do?"

"Do?" said Paula. "What can we do? If you'd told me before we might have been able to stop them."

In Farnbury, Julie thought, I seem to do everything wrong. Why is it that living in the country is so much more difficult than living in London?

"Hadn't we better tell your father?" she said.

Paula looked at her in amazement.

"I've just told you – he's in an awful mood. Besides, what can he do now? If we've lost the pond, he'll be blamed all over again. We'll have to emigrate or something."

The building site looked quite different without the bustle of lorries and the activity of the workmen. Tidy stacks of bricks had been covered with large sheets of tarpaulin. Paula and Julie could see that new padlocks had been put on the doors of some of the huts. They picked their way carefully round the trenches that marked the boundaries of the houses, sniffing with pleasure as they passed the piles of clean, new wood.



"The road really does look more like a road now," said Julie. "Look – there's even a lorry using it."

"That's funny," said Paula. "It must have been able to get all the way through from High Cross."

Then she suddenly grabbed Roly. "Quick! They mustn't see us! That hut over there – come on!"

They managed to dart into the hut as the solitary lorry turned through the opening in the hedge and bumped its way over the frozen ground towards them, stopping by a stack of new timber. Through a crack in the door, they saw three men jump down from the cab and begin to load the planks into the back of the empty lorry.

"Seems a bit silly moving it," said Julie. "It must have taken them ages to stack it up like that."

"Don't you see?" Paula was whispering, her eyes wide. "They're stealing it. They've come here on purpose to take it. That's why they didn't drive through the village. Nobody would expect to see them on the new road when it isn't even finished."

Roly, still excited by the sudden dash to the hut, was giving loud yaps of protest, and they saw one of the men turn and look towards the hut.

"Shut up, Roly!" said Paula. "And keep still."

His lead was in a tangle around his neck, and as she took away her hand to straighten it, he made a sudden leap from her arms and ran, barking fiercely, towards the three men.

"Run for it!" shouted Paula.

Julie watched, horrified, as Paula dashed out towards the lorry and made a grab to snatch up Roly as she passed.

"Julie – come on!"

Without hesitating, Julie began to run. She heard one of the men call out to her as she made a dash towards the opening in the hedge. She glanced back towards the lorry and had a glimpse of a number plate tied on with a piece of rope.



Then, in the next instant, they were out in the lane.

"Keep running!" Paula shouted.

Julie made a final spurt, though she had a pain in her side now and was gasping for breath. Wasn't Paula ever going to stop? Surely they were safe now! Then, at last, just beyond the vicarage, Paula began to slow down.

She was looking disappointed. "I wanted to get the number but they'd tied a false one over the top. Did you see what they looked like?"

Julie stared at her. "I never even thought. I was just too scared."

"The trouble is," said Paula, "I meant to look at Cooper's Pond. That was the whole point of coming – and I forgot all about it."

Julie waited for a moment, carefully choosing her words.

"Well, I didn't, she said. "I had a good look, and it's exactly as it was on the day I lost Roly. So they haven't filled it in yet and we're not too late to stop them."

Paula looked very impressed.

"Good old you," she said.

It was, Julie thought, the very first time that Farnbury had approved of her.

## Chapter 8

For the next few weeks the weather seemed to be on their side. The rubble beside the pond froze into a rock-hard mass and work on the houses was brought to a halt by the intense cold and freezing winds.

Meanwhile, they were having difficulty in deciding who they should tell about the filling in of Cooper's Pond.

"Dad won't listen if it's anything to do with the building site," said Paula. "After all that fuss last year, he said he never wanted to hear another word about that land – so it would be pointless trying to tell him. He'd get even more bad-tempered than he is now."

"I suppose I could tell my dad," said Julie. "Only he's hopeless on anything practical – he'd only start reading books about frogs and then forget what he ought to be saying to the builders."

"I think we should try and stop the builders ourselves," said Paula, and Julie said that was the best idea they'd had so far.

"But how?" she said.

Paula shrugged. "Oh, there are lots of societies that help people to save woodlands and wild flowers and animals and things. I'm sure they'd be interested in the frogs."

"Or we could tell the police," said Julie. "After all, we must be in their good books since we told them about the men stealing those planks."

Paula gazed at her in admiration.

"Now, why didn't I think of that?"

After their encounter with the thieves on the building site, they had gone straight away to the police house on the

Green. They had passed on all the information they could remember about the three men in the lorry coming over the hill from High Cross. Constable Burton had taken a lot of notes at the time and had listened carefully. Since then, however, they hadn't noticed any reports in the Broxton Echo about the capturing of any thieves on the Farnbury building site.

It was strange that, having decided to go back again to the police, the first person they met in the village was Constable Burton. He was just about to lean his bicycle against the front gate of the post office.

"I've been looking for you two," he said. "I felt that I didn't really say thank you when you came to report that building site incident. Not that I'm approving of you playing on a building site, mind but we'll overlook it this time." He gave them a large friendly wink. "Seeing as how you both kept your eyes open and had the sense to report what you saw."

"Have you caught the men yet?" asked Julie.

Constable Burton grinned. "Give us a chance! We'd already had a report about some missing tools on another site in High Cross, so we'd warned the builders not to leave too much lying around. But taking advice is one thing ... acting on it is something else."

"Actually," said Julie, "we were going to come and see you about something else. It's Cooper's Pond. I think they're going to fill it in."

Constable Burton seemed to have his mind elsewhere.

"Haven't we just had a letter from your father, Julie? Something to do with road signs and where he should apply?"

"It must have been someone else," said Julie. "Dad hasn't even got a car. He wouldn't know the first thing about road signs."

"Funny," said Constable Burton, "I could have sworn ...



Anyway, I must be off. Duty calls." And before they had time to protest, or to call him back, he had cycled away and disappeared over the bridge.

"Well, that wasn't much good, was it?" said Paula. "We'd better go into Broxton library and see if we can get the address of one of those societies. I hate writing letters but I can't think of anything else – unless we stand in front of Cooper's Pond every day and hold up a banner or something."

Ever practical, Julie said, "But how can we do that when we're at school every day while the builders are working?"

"Anyway," said Paula, "nothing's going to happen yet with all this snow around. We've got bags of time to write that letter and the frogs won't be moving until the spring."

However, before they had a chance to go to the library in Broxton, Julie arrived home from school one day to find her mother drinking tea with a visitor. He was a sandy-haired young man with curly hair, and he was wearing a track suit and running shoes.

"This is Mr Robinson, Julie. He's the gentleman who's building the new houses in Church Lane."

The young man held out his hand. "I've really come to say thank you. I understand from Constable Burton that you and Paula Hammond reported a theft from our Farnbury site. I wanted to see Paula, too, and put you both in the picture about that other matter."

"What other matter is that, then?" said Mrs Barlow, pouring out a second cup of tea.

"Cooper's Pond. Fortunately I met your father, Julie, before any further damage was done."

"My father?" said Julie.

"My husband?" said Mrs Barlow.

"Didn't he mention we'd met?" said Mr Robinson.

"My husband's memory," said Mrs Barlow through pursed lips, "is not what it might be sometimes. If we waited



to be told things, Mr Robinson, we'd be waiting till kingdom come – and that's the truth."

"But I don't understand," said Julie.

Mr Robinson smiled. "I was out running one day on Castle Hill. Your father was up at the old Roman fort."

"Oh, yes," said Julie, "now I remember."

"He certainly knows a lot about the history of this area, doesn't he? I know you haven't been here long but I learnt a lot about Farnbury that morning. He's been looking at some of the old maps in the Broxton Record Office apparently. He says the pond's shown on all of them, and it's mentioned in the county histories. Mr Barlow's a great reader, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Mrs Barlow, "and generally at the wrong time."

"And did he tell you about the frogs coming every year?" said Julie.

"He most certainly did. I've heard about these frog-crossings but I've never actually seen one. I'll have to make a point of being in Farnbury at the right time, won't I?"

"Would somebody mind explaining," said Mrs Barlow. "What's all this about frogs?"

There was a sudden loud banging on the front door, and Mrs Barlow went to the window.

"Oh dear," she said, "it's Mrs Thomas. She's probably collecting some more jumble."

"Anyway, I must get back," said Mr Robinson. "Your father will bring you up to date, Julie. He's got it all organised. When the time comes I shall warn all the lorry-drivers and by then we'll have the signs up and the fence erected and ..."

Interrupting him, Julie said, "Do you mean you're not going to fill in Cooper's Pond?"

"Your father would have something to say if we did. You should have heard him that morning when he found out that we'd got rid of some of the willows. I had this furious phone

call from Northfield, and at that point I hadn't met him, of course. I thought he was just the local conservationist out to draw blood before the houses went up, but, of course, once I'd met him and realised the importance of Cooper's Pond as a natural habitat ... well, I was with him all the way."

Mrs Barlow was suddenly looking quite pale.

"Perhaps you'd let yourself out," she said. "I can't make head or tail of all this."

"Shall I let in the lady at the door?" said Mr Robinson.

Mrs Barlow gave a faint smile. "If it's Mrs Thomas you'll not have any choice," she said.

"What a pleasant-looking young man," said Mrs Thomas, bustling into the small front room. "Now then, can I put you down for one of the daytime patrols, Julie? We should get a lot of volunteers after Rod and Tony have done me the posters. We thought one in the church porch, and one on the Green ... Oh, yes, and Mr Barlow says we shall need plenty of buckets ... for carrying some of them across Church Lane. And he says we want some good reflective clothing for the night patrols. You see, by the time the frogs are due, the new road will be open and there'll be all the ordinary traffic from High Cross ..."

Mrs Barlow had sunk back into one of the easy chairs and was hanging on to one of its arms, as if in need of some kind of support.

"Julie – what is she talking about? It's not your father again, is it? I thought it would be all right if we brought him to the country ... but it's just like it was before ... he always has to get ... oh, I don't know ... involved. He's not the same as other people. You think he's sitting there doing nothing – but before you know where you are, he's at it again."

She looked as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

"But Mum," said Julie gently, "this time it's all right. This time I think Dad's saved Cooper's Pond."

## Chapter 9

The next visitor to arrive at Number 2 Pinfold Lane after Mrs Thomas had left was Paula. Bursting with excitement, she persuaded Julie out into the lane beyond Mrs Barlow's earshot.

"Guess what!" she said.

Julie sighed. "You're too late. We know all about it. Mr Robinson's just been."

"No, not the pond," said Paula. "He told me all about that just now when I met him near the bridge. It's about Rod and Tony."

"What about them?" said Julie.

Paula beamed. "They're speaking to me again! They came across to speak to Mr Robinson, and then asked me if I'd got any poster paint left over from last year when I did some leaflets for the school disco."

Julie looked at her. "Is that all?"

"All?" said Paula. "You don't know what it's been like all this time. But it was funny really. I think they forgot for a minute, but I just acted as if nothing had happened, and they were forced to go on talking." She giggled. "They want the paint for some frog posters. Mrs Thomas has a roster for volunteers to sign. Honestly, your father's fantastic. There we were, wondering how we could save the pond, and all the time, he's quietly getting on with doing it."

"I'm not so sure about quietly," said Julie. "The whole village seems to be going mad and I think Mum might be having a nervous breakdown."

"What are you so cross about?" said Paula. "I'd have thought you'd have been pleased."



"I am," said Julie, "but I don't see why he had to be so secretive. In fact, I shall go and meet him off the bus. He's been in Broxton all afternoon and I think it's high time he did some explaining."

The bus arrived on the Green a few minutes late, which gave Julie time to consider the things she had decided to say to her father. He was the last to get off the bus, and she could see at once that he was looking very pleased with himself. He had a large bag of library books strung over his one good arm, and was holding a tiny bunch of snowdrops.

"Your mother always likes the first ones," he said, and handed over the tiny cluster for her to hold, almost as if he had been expecting her to be standing there for that sole purpose.

Suddenly angry again, she said, "Dad – why didn't you tell us what you were doing? Why do you always keep things to yourself?"

"Supposing you begin at the beginning?" he said.

Grabbing the bag of books from his shoulder she said, "I shall throw these into the river unless you tell me."

He gazed at her in amazement. "Do I really make you as angry as that?"

"You make all of us angry," said Julie. "If Mr Robinson hadn't come round to tell us, we wouldn't have known anything. First you break your arm, then you sit reading all day so that you can't help Mum or do anything for Uncle Joe. And now we find out that you're organising frog patrols and telling everybody in Farnbury what to do ..."

Her voice faded, and there was a painful, choky feeling in her throat.

Her father was looking at her in complete astonishment.

"But I told you I'd met this nice young man that morning on Castle Hill and you didn't seem to be interested. I'd no idea he'd taken over the family building firm from his father,

or that he was involved with the new houses until we got chatting. I happened to mention the old enclosure maps I'd seen in the County Record Office – and the whole thing took off from there. He's not going to change his plans for the site, Julie, but he cares just as much about the frogs as you and Paula do. I'd already noticed that pile of rubble – in fact your Uncle Joe had mentioned it to the vicar, so Mr Robinson would have been told about the pond even if I hadn't met him that morning. I can't claim that I've achieved very much, but surely all that matters is that Farnbury is going to keep its pond, and the frogs are not going to be under threat."

Julie was silent for a long time. She had never before heard her father make such a long speech, for it certainly did sound like a speech. She could see that what he was saying was very true and somehow more real than some of the things that she had said to him.

Speaking slowly, she chose her words carefully. "I suppose I was cross because I wanted to be the one who saved the pond."

Reaching over for the snowdrops he said, "There are two bunches in there. You'd better keep one for yourself – a kind of apology."

"An apology?"

"For being me," said Mr Barlow.

## Chapter 10

The winter seemed unending. England, according to the weather experts, was breaking some of its own records for snowfall and sub-zero temperatures.

"The spring, when it arrives this year," said Mrs Barlow, "is going to feel very special. Even if the buses stop in London, there's always the Underground. But here, once you've watched your Uncle Joe trying to clear the lane for the milk lorry, it makes you realise just how far we are from the equator."

Julie smiled at her tolerantly. For her, the winter was one of the best she had ever known. She had spent most Saturdays on Castle Hill with Paula, whose sledge had proved a constant temptation and challenge until the very last of the day's light.

The snow had brought so many satisfactions. She and Paula had crunched their way through the crisp whiteness of Poachers' Wood, snapping long icicles from branches as they went – long swords of glistening smoothness. On one particular morning, the sight of footprints that were not their own had startled them to a sudden halt – until they heard the sound of laughter and saw Rod and Tony lying in wait, with a vast armoury of snowballs at the ready.

Roly, growing fast, had now shed his puppy fat, and on all their walks, nosed and burrowed in delight into the drifts that marked the hedgerows and every hidden gate. Even the school bus no longer risked the narrow lanes of Farnbury but waited, noisy and impatient, at the crossroads on the main Broxton road.

Inside Number 2 Pinfold Lane, the Barlows continued to

experience their first winter in the country in the greatest of comfort. The warmth from the log fire in the front parlour spread up the twisting staircase into the two tiny bedrooms. At night, Julie would lie there in the darkness, savouring the faint scent of wood-smoke and listening to the occasional cracking of the cottage timbers as they eased and settled into the night's cold.

Then, one morning in March, they noticed a strange lightening of the leaden sky, and by midday the sun was shining over wet, newly bare branches. The windows of the cottage lost their patterns of frost, and under a small patch of melted snow by the front gate, Julie saw the first bud of a celandine.

"We mustn't count our chickens too soon," said Mrs Barlow. "There's bound to be more snow to come, but once it goes for good, I must try and remember where it was I went to pick violets all those years ago. In those days the children used to gather them for Mothering Sunday, and take each mum and granny a bunch before the morning service. We wouldn't pick them now, but at least we could go and look."

She was quite right about the thaw not lasting, for after a week the snow returned again. By then, the last mile of the new road to High Cross had been completed, and private cars were joining the traffic from the building site in Church Lane.

Then at last, in mid-March, the final thaw arrived. Once again it became possible to hear the sound of the river from the bus stop near the bridge, and to look up and see that the highest point of Castle Hill had reverted to its usual green.

Then, one morning during the following week, Rod and Tony reported that the frogs living in the marshy land behind the grounds of the manor were making a great deal of noise, and that already a few seemed to be on the move.

"Oh, why couldn't it have happened in the school holidays?" Julie said, "Now we're going to miss it all."

The boys laughed. "Don't worry – it doesn't all happen overnight. It takes them quite a time to get as far as Church Lane. That's really the last lap for them ... after that, it's open ground straight up to Cooper's Pond."

"Except that now there's a building site in their way," Paula said.

"That's why we rang Mr Robinson last night." Tony was looking very pleased with himself. "He gave us his private number, because he doesn't often have to come to the Farnbury site. And he says there's no panic because he's told all the workmen, and the signs are all ready."

"Signs?" said Julie.

"Your father wrote to the Department of Transport ages ago. There's a frog on them to warn drivers." He grinned. "They're almost as good as the ones we had on our posters."

So Dad has been busy yet again, thought Julie. He's probably told everybody else in the village and Mum and I are the last ones to know.

"I'd better warn Mrs Thomas then," she said. "She's got the patrol rosters all ready, and has been borrowing buckets all over the place. She'll be even more bossy if she thinks it's all going to start happening."

But when at last, after days of impatient waiting, the frog crossing of Church Lane began in earnest, neither Julie or anyone else in Farnbury could have criticised any of Mrs Thomas's efforts at organisation.

It looked, to Julie, as if the whole of the village had arrived to watch the strange invasion. A newspaper article in the Broxton Echo the week before had produced a mass of interested spectators. Many of them had been following the frogs' progress on the local radio from the first sighting near the manor lodge to the possible arrivals in Church Lane. The field behind the Cow and Sixpence public house had had to be turned into a temporary car-park. Spectators lined the edges of Church Lane, and there were rumours that the new



road would be closed temporarily as far as High Cross.

Work on the new building site was still in progress, but Mr Robinson had instructed that it should be concentrated on the houses far beyond Cooper's Pond. People were saying that he was about to be interviewed in the large television van that had appeared on the Green overnight.

Uncle Joe had even found time to leave his lambing shed. "Now then, what do you reckon to all this, then?"

"I think it's fantastic," said Julie.

She could hardly bear to look away from the ground in front of her, which was beginning to be filled by small, hopping, leaping bodies – a moving stream of frogs surging forward with what seemed to be unstoppable determination.

A few were confused by the lengths of low fence that had been specially erected to direct their crossing points on the lane. These frogs were being lifted carefully by hand and carried in buckets to safety, away from the wheels of the waiting lorries that paused in a line beyond the new road signs.

Mrs Thomas, her face flushed and her felt hat askew, was serving tea from an urn at the back of a Land Rover.

"You and Paula are on at six, don't forget," she said, "so wear something warm and bring a torch. Oh, Vicar – I've been looking for you. You're on at five – is that all right?"

"Splendid," said the vicar. "But I thought I was on now, actually."

"No, it's the play group mothers at the moment," said Mrs Thomas. "It's that phone of yours again – you really ought to complain."

"There's my father!" said Julie suddenly. "Over there – and he's with yours, Paula."

Paula stared in amazement. "They're together!"

The two men, carrying between them a large tool kit and several pieces of new wood, crossed the lane to join them.

"What on earth are you doing here?" said Paula to her dad.



"Who do you think put up all these fences?" he said.

Mr Barlow put out his one good hand and gave his companion a cheerful thump on the shoulder.

"I couldn't have managed without him," he said, "not with my arm out of use like this."

"Excuse me, Mr Hammond," said Mrs Thomas, approaching with a plastic beaker of tea, "but did you say with sugar or without?"

"Without, please," said Mr Hammond.

Paula stared at Julie. "Did you hear that – they're talking to him again!"

Someone took hold of Julie's arm, and she turned and saw her mother swathed in a long cream scarf and a woolly hat that Julie had never seen before.

"I thought you didn't like frogs, Mum," said Julie.

"When in Rome ... " said Mrs Barlow. "Besides, I had no choice. Mrs Thomas says I'm on duty at five with the vicar."

"Right then, Bill," said Mr Barlow, "let's go and check that last bit near the post box, shall we? Another couple of metres of fencing might stop the odd frog wandering off towards the new road."

"You're the boss," said Mr Hammond, and they walked away together, talking closely as they went.

Paula stared after them, her mouth wide.

"Did you hear that?" she said. "He called him 'Bill' – and Dad didn't even seem to mind."

She glanced away. "I think I'll go and join them," and she hurried away quickly, eager to catch them up.

"That father of yours, Julie," said Uncle Joe, "will never cease to surprise me. I don't know how he's done it, but he's managed to make the whole village forget just how angry they were about those new houses. Now look at 'em all – up to their eyes in frogs and loving every minute. They're even talking to the Hammonds again as if nothing was wrong." He glanced at his watch. "Well, I suppose I'd better get back."

We're bottle-feeding a couple of yesterday's lambs, so if you want to give me a hand this weekend ... ?"

Watching the tall figure moving away through the crowd, Julie thought, life keeps on getting better and better. Mum was right. I don't ever think about his legs now and about how funny he looks ... he's just Uncle Joe and that's all there is to it.

She felt someone at her side and saw her father there, smiling.

"Did you know that Mr Robinson is planning to make a permanent nature reserve round Cooper's Pond? Just a tiny one, of course. He says the buyers of the new houses will have to like it or lump it – but I have a feeling he knows when he's on to a good thing."

"Dad," said Julie, "how do you do it?"

"Do what?" said Mr Barlow.

"Make everything happen the way you want it?" said Julie. "Like all this – and everyone speaking to Mr Hammond again."

Her father hesitated. "I don't know really. I suppose I just ... dropped a few hints."

Puzzled, Julie said, "About what?"

"I encouraged people to wonder if it might not have been Bill Hammond who saved Cooper's Pond and who threatened the developers with a public enquiry if they didn't preserve such an ancient pond. After all, he was in a position to dictate terms when he sold the land. Anyway, the odd word in the post office or at the bus stop seemed to do the trick."

"But, Dad, he didn't do any of those things. You know he didn't."

"Didn't he?" said Mr Barlow, looking surprised. "Well, you know how I always get things muddled. You and Mum are always telling me how easily I get confused."

"But that's the trouble," said Julie. "You only pretend to be



confused. And, if you ask me, all those things you said Bill Hammond did – you did them, didn't you?"

He looked at her and smiled. "I didn't have to, Julie. Mr Robinson didn't need any persuading. It was just lucky that I happened to be up on Castle Hill that morning – and happened to have read some of your uncle's books on the history of Farnbury. The rest was easy enough ... a slight change of viewpoint about Bill Hammond made them all forget about the new houses and concentrate on the frogs." He was looking down at the small bodies that still filled the lane in front of them. "You know, this reminds me of Ealing in the rush hour."

Julie was indignant. "Oh, Dad – this is better than Ealing."

"Is it, Julie?" he said, in a serious, anxious kind of voice.

"Is it really?"

"It's much better," she said. "And I don't ever want to leave Farnbury – not ever!"

Then, as she looked at him, she suddenly became aware of something different.

"They've taken the plaster off your arm!"

Her father slipped his hand quickly back into its sling, glancing guiltily behind him to see if anyone else had noticed.

"Bother!" he said. "I keep forgetting. But look, Julie – he glanced behind him again. "No need to mention it to your uncle right away."

"But when did they – ?"

He silenced her, placing a finger on her lips.

"You see, he still has a few more books I haven't read yet."

Julie looked at him, and shook her head slowly in mock disapproval.

"Oh, Dad – honestly!"

He really was, she thought, with the greatest satisfaction, quite unlike any other father in the whole world.



JOHNS HOPKINS





# THE FARNBURY FROGS

Julie and her family have to move out of London and into Farnbury. Accepting the move and the countryside is not easy, but Julie gradually finds some friends, catches some thieves – and finds some frogs to help!

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